

Handjob

by

Erik Patterson

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CHARACTERS (in order of appearance):

KEITH, 40s-50s, white, a writer, disheveled. Gay.

EDDIE, 20s, black, handsome, fit. Straight.

KEVIN, 40s-50s, white, a writer, disheveled. Gay. The same actor also plays **TREVOR**.

BRADLEY, 20s, white, fit, beautiful, confident. Fluid. The same actor also plays **JEFFREY**.

SUSAN, 30s-40s, black, an artist. Queer.

KATE, 20s, any ethnicity, a butch dyke.

SETTING

An apartment.

TIME

Now.

NOTES

Urgency.

Words in brackets [*like this*] should be thought but not spoken.

A right slash " / " indicates overlapping dialogue.

Trevor and Jeffrey should not be listed in the program.

SCENE ONE

A cluttered studio apartment. The man who lives here isn't technically a hoarder, but he's hoarder-adjacent. There are two free-standing bookcases that divide the kitchen from the rest of the apartment, creating the illusion of two rooms.

The bed is haphazardly-made. The bookcases are overflowing. We're talking *books literally everywhere*: on the coffee table, on the end tables, next to the bed. *Every-fucking-where*.

In the cramped kitchen area: dirty dishes fill the sink. Stacks of unread New Yorkers, along with stacks of mail and unpaid bills.

Two men stand by the bed: EDDIE wears something casual. KEITH seems over-dressed.

KEITH

Thanks for coming over.

EDDIE

You lucked out.

KEITH

Did I?

EDDIE

Definitely.

KEITH

Isn't that kind of cocky?

EDDIE

How so?

KEITH

Just that you -- that you think I'm *lucky* to have you here.

EDDIE

I meant my schedule.

KEITH

Your schedule?

EDDIE

I had a cancellation this morning. So when you texted --

KEITH

Oh.

EDDIE

-- I was able to come right over. That was lucky.

KEITH

I thought you were commenting on my looks.

EDDIE

No.

KEITH

Thank God.

EDDIE

Miscommunication.

KEITH

I feel like an asshole now.

EDDIE

You don't need to apologize.

KEITH

I hit on this go-go boy once. I asked him to come home with me. He said: "Sorry, I don't go home with people I meet at work." Then he adds: "But don't feel bad, a *hot* guy hit on me last night and I said no to him too."

EDDIE

Ouch.

KEITH

Hey, if you want to get comfortable...

Eddie sits, takes his shoes off.

EDDIE

Have you read all these books?

KEITH

I buy them faster than I read them. I've read the ones there -- *those* shelves, I've read all those. The ones over there, I'd say about half those. Then that's my "to read" pile.

EDDIE

You could get a Kindle.

KEITH

I like holding a book, smelling the pages, being able to flip back to a specific line. Using a Kindle's like having sex with a doll when you could have the real thing.

(beat)

Do you ever get overwhelmed thinking about all the great books you'll never read?

EDDIE

No.

KEITH

At least if there's ever an apocalypse, I'll have plenty of books to keep me busy.

EDDIE

Are you nervous?

KEITH

When?

EDDIE

Now.

KEITH

No.

EDDIE

You feel comfortable?

KEITH

Yes.

EDDIE

Then the clock's ticking. Better get your money's worth.

KEITH

Oh, speaking of which...

Keith grabs his wallet.

EDDIE
You can pay me at the end.

KEITH
Okay.

EDDIE
You said you had supplies?

KEITH
Yes.

Keith goes into the kitchen area. Returns with a box, puts it on the bed. Eddie glances inside.

EDDIE
You have good stuff.

KEITH
It's everything you said you needed.

EDDIE
Most people don't pay attention to that part of the email.

KEITH
I follow directions well.

EDDIE
Then let's get to it.

Eddie takes his shirt off. *Fuck, he's hot.* He reaches into the box. Pulls out: rubber gloves.

EDDIE
Safety first, right?

Eddie puts on the gloves, reaches into the box again and retrieves a bottle of Pledge and a rag. Then he...dusts the bookcase.

Keith watches Eddie dust for a beat.

KEITH
Hey, Eddie. What should I do while you clean? I've never done this.

EDDIE

You can watch me. We can talk.

KEITH

That sounds good.

EDDIE

Be normal.

KEITH

Normal. Got it.

It must be strange going into other people's homes and cleaning.

EDDIE

It's a gig.

KEITH

But I mean -- seeing how other people live, seeing what they throw away, seeing how they care for their things -- or *don't* care for their things, as the case may be --

EDDIE

Trash is trash, dirt is dirt.

KEITH

You know what I mean, though: there's an intimacy there --

EDDIE

You're romanticizing what I do -- what you're implying -- it's not like that.

KEITH

But you're looking behind the curtain of people's daily lives.

EDDIE

I might *vacuum* the curtains. But I'm not looking behind them.

KEITH

Have you ever cleaned for someone famous?

EDDIE

Do you really think I'd answer that?

KEITH

Okay, don't answer it with words. Blink once for yes, twice for no.

EDDIE

Sorry, man. I'm not playing this game.

KEITH

You would've said no if the answer was no. Which means you *have* cleaned for famous people. Okay, I know you can't say *who*, but what if I guess it?

EDDIE

I don't get the fascination with famous people.

KEITH

It's harmless.

EDDIE

I was at Starbucks. The guy in front of me looks familiar, this little white dude with tattoos up and down his arms. While we wait for our drinks, I notice people staring at me. It's making me uncomfortable. Then I realize they're looking at *him*. Listening for his order, trying to subtly get his attention. And I don't mean one or two people. Everyone. The barista says "Justin," he takes his coffee and leaves. And then the place erupts. Men, women, old, young, *everyone*. I don't get it. It's a person getting coffee. How is that interesting? How is that exciting?

KEITH

Timberlake?

EDDIE

Bieber.

KEITH

What kind of coffee did he order?

EDDIE

I don't remember.

KEITH

Was he cute in person?

EDDIE

You're missing the point of my story.

KEITH

I get what you're saying but I disagree. Celebrities are part of our collective unconscious. We stare at them on our screens. It's completely natural to stare in the real world too.

EDDIE

I don't know, man. I think it's creepy.

Eddie cleans for a beat.

KEITH

Have you ever been to the Russian Baths? On 10th?

EDDIE

No.

KEITH

I went the other day. It's a total scene --

EDDIE

How so?

KEITH

Just...so many gay guys. Like, all the gay guys. Every gay guy in the East Village. I walk in and I'm like: *they're all here*. Well, most of them...

EDDIE

What are you saying?

KEITH

...*you* weren't there.

EDDIE

I'm not gay.

KEITH

You're a shirtless cleaner.

EDDIE

It's a job.

KEITH

A gay sex job.

EDDIE

That's not what this is.

KEITH

But you're *using* sex --

EDDIE

I don't have sex with my clients, so if that's what you're expecting --

KEITH

I *don't* expect that. But you're using sex *appeal* --

EDDIE

My sexuality has nothing to do with this. If you want to pay to look at me while I clean, I'm happy to oblige. It's not gay, it's not sex, it's *cleaning*.

KEITH

Straight cleaning.

EDDIE

If you need to put a label on it.

KEITH

Sorry I made an assumption. Anyway. So I go there. And it's my first time. I walk in and it feels like every gay guy in New York is there, right?

EDDIE

Where were the women?

KEITH

This was on Thursday. Thursdays and Sundays are men only.

EDDIE

Now *that* sounds gay.

KEITH

You get the picture. Speaking of, could you dust those [*framed photos*].

Eddie dusts a framed photo. Looks at it. Maybe we notice it's a picture of Keith with his arm around another man. Maybe we don't.

KEITH

Anyway, so I'd never been there before. And when I walk in, I feel this thing -- this male -- this sex *thing* -- in the air. Like I feel it on my skin. Everyone's walking around in these little towels, blatantly checking each other out.

EDDIE

That sounds uncomfortable.

KEITH

No, you don't get it, it was great. Have you ever read Armistead Maupin? Being there felt like I was inside his books. Like, classic homo Heaven, you know? There's this towel attendant -- straight, definitely straight, aggressively straight -- who's playing Spotify on his phone, and as I walk around, checking out guys, his little speaker blares *Time After Time*, and it suddenly makes me nostalgic for this moment before it's even over. I go into the dry sauna and there's about seven or eight guys. The only available seat's on the top bench, so I squeeze in. That's when I notice the guy across from me letting his towel... gently...

fall...

away...

And he lightly brushes his dick with the back of his hand...

EDDIE

Which you took as some sort of come on?

KEITH

Oh, it was a signal. It was definitely a signal.

EDDIE

How can you be sure?

KEITH

Because three seconds later, the whole room's jerking off. It's like porn, but real life.

EDDIE

Where's this story going?

KEITH

Sorry, the dry sauna's just the set-up. So a little later, I'm in the steam room. And there's steam everywhere, so it's hard to see. And I'm not wearing my glasses because, you know, *steam*. I look at the guy next to me, and he isn't covering himself...and he's got this raging erection. I'm talking: the biggest penis I've ever seen, sticking straight up, rock hard. He isn't trying to hide it, he's *flaunting* it, like "hey, look what I got." He's just holding the tip. Like, his hand's just there, cupping the tip of this massive boner. And his entire demeanor, his entire pose -- it's like an invitation. So I reach over... And I grab it...

EDDIE

...Okay.

KEITH

And that's when I hear --

He squeezes a half-empty water bottle on the coffee table. It makes a CRINKLING NOISE.

But why did you tell it to *me*? EDDIE

I was making conversation. KEITH

I'm trying to work. EDDIE

You said I could talk -- KEITH

Not about dicks. EDDIE

You didn't specify. KEITH

It's too much. EDDIE

Too much "gay stuff." KEITH

Come on, Keith. I didn't say that. EDDIE

KEITH
But it's just -- you're standing there with your shirt off, cleaning my apartment, and you're acting like this isn't gay, and you don't want me to talk about dicks. Don't you think that's, I don't know, kinda weird?

EDDIE
Look, I'd be more comfortable talking about...anything...if I knew more about you first.

KEITH
So what do you -- this is -- I mean -- what do you mean?

EDDIE
Something personal.

KEITH
The Russian Bath story was personal.

EDDIE
You really think that?

KEITH
I do.

EDDIE
It's a joke. You said it was a / funny story.

KEITH
It really happened.

EDDIE
But it's not like you told me that story so you could connect with me.

KEITH
I'm just making conversation, dude.

EDDIE
Tell me something deeper, then.

KEITH
How deep?

EDDIE
How about this: how about I start? You want to hear something gay?

KEITH
Yes.

EDDIE
Fine. I have this vivid memory from my childhood. When my uncle came out to the family. I didn't realize what was going on at the time.

KEITH
How old were you?

EDDIE
Eight, maybe. I don't know. Nine.

KEITH
Old enough to understand what a gay person is.

EDDIE
But I'd never encountered any at that point --

KEITH
You knew your uncle.

EDDIE

He called the whole family together. So he could tell us all at the same time. And my family, they aren't the most -- empathetic people --

KEITH

I'm sorry.

EDDIE

Don't do that. So -- my family isn't big, okay? There's my mom, my dad, one uncle, one aunt, my grandma, and me. That's all.

KEITH

What happened?

EDDIE

Right. So he sits us down and he tells us, he says it. And there's this hush. My mom shifts in her seat, to block me from my uncle -- like she's protecting me.

KEITH

Jesus.

EDDIE

And then my dad tells him to get help, he needs to see a doctor, he doesn't have to be this way -- you know, things like that.

KEITH

I hate that.

EDDIE

And then my grandma says: "The penis sits on top of the balls."

KEITH

What the fuck?

EDDIE

She kept saying it. "The penis sits on top of the balls."

KEITH

I don't get what that's supposed to mean --

EDDIE

She was saying he didn't have one. She was saying he wasn't a man. If he was gay -- if he was going to choose to be --

KEITH

It's not a choice.

EDDIE

I'm saying how she felt. She kept saying it. "The penis sits on top of the balls." My uncle tried to get through to her, but she was relentless. He started sobbing and then he left. That's the last time I saw him.

KEITH

He never reached out?

EDDIE

Maybe he tried. I don't know. I was only a kid. They wouldn't talk about him.

KEITH

That's depressing. But, you know, it's not entirely surprising.

EDDIE

Why not?

KEITH

I've heard black families tend to be tougher.

EDDIE

What do you mean?

KEITH

With the whole coming out thing.

EDDIE

Are you about to say you've got a lot of black friends? Because I can't --

KEITH

No, don't quote me on this, it isn't anecdotal, all I'm saying is: I've read a lot of books, remember, and my impression is, among African-Americans, the masculinity issues -- it seems like a lot of weight to carry, that's all. I'm sorry you lost your uncle.

EDDIE

Me too. Anyway, that's how you do it.

KEITH

Do what?

EDDIE

Open up. Connect.

KEITH

I'm not sure if --

EDDIE

It's easy. All you have to do is talk. Tell me who you are.

Blackout.

SCENE TWO

The same apartment, but less cluttered. It feels slightly disorienting. As if we're in the same place, but also...not. Two men stand by the bed:

BRADLEY is full of swagger. He wears tight workout clothes that show off his muscles.

KEVIN looks disheveled, in ill-fitting clothes.

KEVIN

So...how do we...

BRADLEY

How do we *what*?

KEVIN

Begin. I haven't done this before.

BRADLEY

You've never done this before?

KEVIN

No. And I'm just, a little -- I mean, you're just here for -- I mean, this is just -- I want to make sure I understand the parameters, is all. This whole thing. This...*you*.

BRADLEY

What about me?

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!

Email erik@erikpatterson.org to request a full draft.